

**Covert Obsolescence**  
**Installations by Jim Sanborn**

**gallery  
one**



**Covert Obsolescence: Installations by Jim Sanborn**  
September 12 - November 8, 1992

This exhibition was made possible by the FUNd at the  
Corcoran and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the  
Visual Arts, Inc.

**Related event**

**Meet the Artist: Jim Sanborn**

Thursday, October 1, 1992

7:00 - 8:00 p.m.

The Frances and Armand Hammer Auditorium

FREE with museum admission

For information call Education Department at  
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The Corcoran Gallery of Art  
500 17th Street, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20006

# gallery One

*"I was profoundly affected by the CIA environment. I worked there for two and a half years, and the atmosphere never ceased to amaze me: the sense of always being watched, of never being alone, and of constantly wondering about how I would feel to be a part of that community. After a while I began to notice this paper pulp, maybe forty or fifty tons of documents, leaving the Agency day after day after day, like a waterfall, flowing continuously. It was amazing, the quantity of material that exited that place. And I knew that these were the remains of secret documents, and in some ways there were similarities between this flow of paper and materials I had used before. It was like finding a fossil and cracking open the rock to discover what is inside. Imagine listening into a secret conversation, one that you can hear but can't understand. It is like peering through a window: it's voyeuristic. That kind of gaze produces a certain kind of gratification that is obviously dangerous, but also magical to me. That immediate gratification that comes from being an interloper who discovers a deep secret, that is what this exhibition is about."<sup>1</sup>*

As the Cold War has ended, the rationale for complex, interdependent networks of worldwide intelligence agencies has begun to unravel. With the downfall of East Germany and the Soviet Union, many of the written documents gathered and secreted by the Soviet KGB and the East German Stasi have suddenly been made public. Access to these files has produced a number of painful revelations. Not the least of these was the way intelligence apparatuses were used to spy on the populations they were ostensibly created to protect. Agents encouraged a pervasive atmosphere of suspicion and distrust by actively recruiting friends to inform on their friends, exhorting neighbors to keep watch on their neighbors.<sup>2</sup> In this country, while

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are taken from an interview with Jim Sanborn on July 10, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> The upheavals caused in East Germany by the disclosure of the Stasi's work are discussed in Stephen Kinzer, "East Germans Face Their Accusers," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 12, 1992, 24.



surveillance operations have maintained a more respectful separation between foreign and domestic espionage, the highly debatable value of CIA reports on Iraq, Central America, and the Soviet Union has called into question both the legitimacy and the purpose of our nation's information-gathering process.<sup>3</sup> The usefulness of clandestine observation to ferret out clear-cut distinctions between good and evil, popularized in such post-World War II American movies as *The Third Man*, 1950, or *The Manchurian Candidate*, 1962, no longer exists. In both east and west, the power of intelligence gathering and dispersal has become apparent: ideology, when it controls the flow of facts, can as easily be used as an effective agent of deception as of communication.

Just as contemporary worldviews present existence as a context that must be understood and subdivided, so works of art can, to some extent, be seen as texts to be decoded. Jim Sanborn selected the title "Covert Obsolescence" for his site-specific installation in the Corcoran's Gallery One to refer to the fact that the intelligence community's reliance on the technology, terminology, and ideology of secrets exerts an invisible authority that is now obsolete. Moreover, with the end of the Cold War, the purpose of encoding information and withholding it from public consumption has become increasingly unclear: even as the intelligence community's emphasis has shifted from the spread of communism to the rise of nationalism, the mechanisms that maintain and control the flow of knowledge have remained stubbornly, almost willfully covert. Sanborn's expression of the double-sided quality of espionage, which encompasses both access and control, presents it as a force which gains power through context. Combining natural and man-made systems, Sanborn's installation juxtaposes sculptural objects with a cinematic projection where content is composed of flickers of shadow and light. Taking the process of encryption as a point of departure, "Covert Obsolescence" pierces the world of appearances, illustrating the artist's view that our ability to understand the forces which surround and impinge on the routines of human interaction gives us the power of individual identity. For Sanborn, this shadowy world is a fertile ground for an exploration of the interdependent relations between power and control, surveillance and voyeurism, and how the discipline of knowledge can lead to the will to dominance.

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<sup>3</sup> For descriptions of the changing role of the CIA, see Roy Godson, *Intelligence Requirements for the 1990s: Collection, Analysis, Counterintelligence, and Covert Action*, (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), and John Ranelagh, *The Agency: The Rise and Decline of the CIA*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).



*"The words and the paragraphs that I selected are very straightforward; I've hidden them from view because I am deliberately secretive about the content of my work. In a lot of ways I am describing the process of the CIA, of what intelligence agencies do and the process of subverting something, the process of encoding and decoding. It becomes about how that process fits into our lives, rather than the details of what is encoded or decoded. What the CIA is encoding and decoding, is, in some ways, less important than how they're doing it, and how that process applies to us."*

The physical sciences, archaeology, and mythology are all influences in Sanborn's sculptural installations. His earlier work sought to fathom the invisible forces of nature, often by combining elements such as water, lodestones, fossils, and petrified wood into theatrical *mise en scenes*. *All Things Turned to Stone*, 1987, and *Striking Stones Under the Thunder*, 1988, were created as a result of the artist's fascination with thunder, lightning, and the winds known as the Coriolis Force. These sources served as the subtext for the artist's metaphorical affirmation of the spirituality of the material world. Sanborn's ability to transform physical effects into intense visual manifestations is highly evident in these works, which are insistently abstract despite their use of concrete, recognizable objects. Sanborn's decision to construct or stage these effects within a carefully controlled setting is also an essential element of their forceful presence: the lighting effects that create the sustained illusion of a lightning bolt in *Striking Stones Under the Thunder* is, in fact, a visual image that in reality only exists for a split second, but gains the impression of a larger, lasting presence through its staging.

Throughout Sanborn's site-specific strategy for the two separate but adjacent installations in "Covert Obsolescence" there is a dynamic tension between information that is intimate and private, and scale that is monumental and public. In *The Code Room*, 1992 a bronze cylinder perforated with letters occupies the center of the room. Reminiscent of an early mechanical encoding/decoding device, this cylinder functions as a enormous projection unit, from which emanates a luminous spray of light that



*Striking Stones Under the Thunder*, 1988



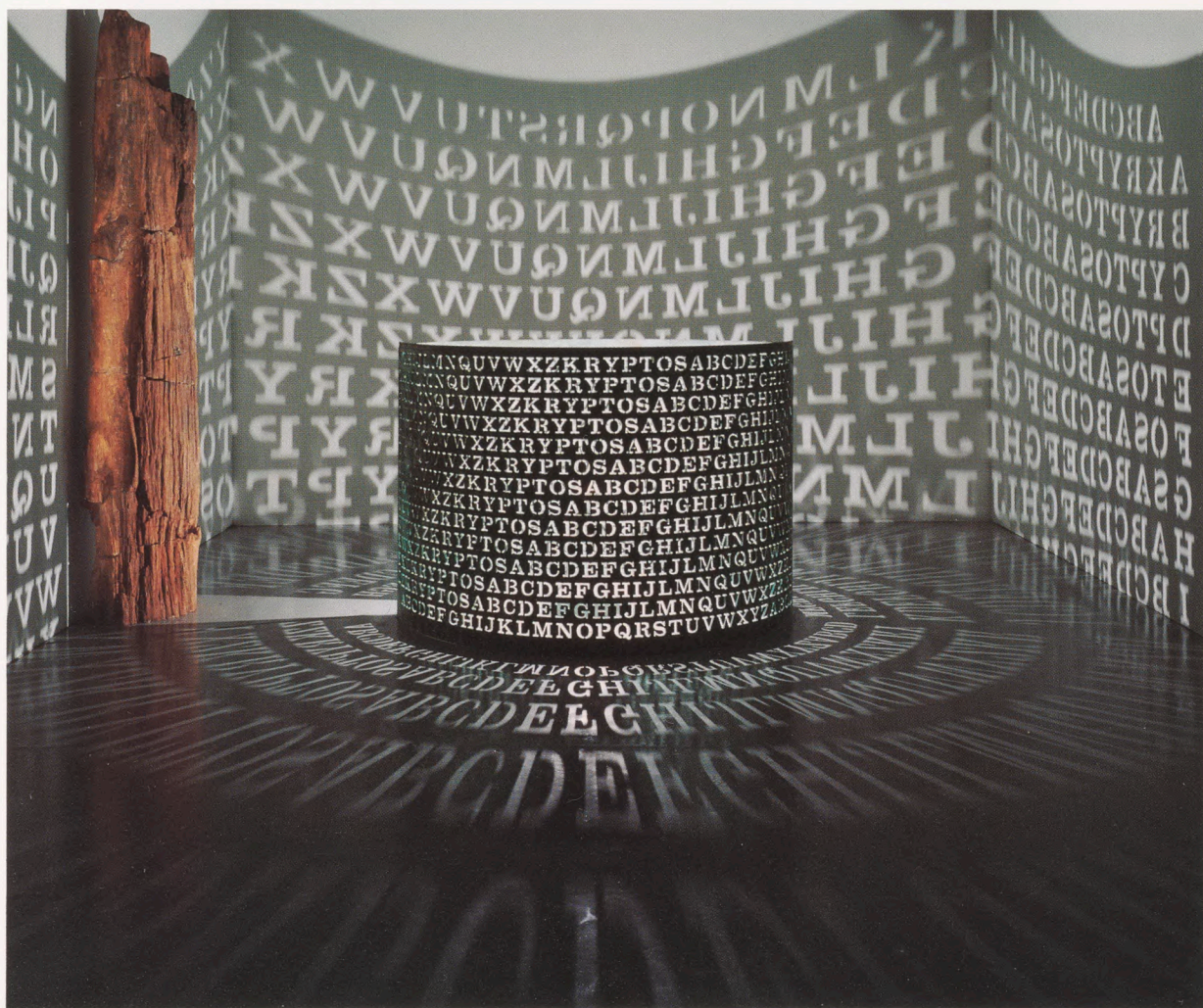


*Listening Post, 1992*



transforms the floors, walls, and ceiling of the room into an enveloping text. Expanding on an earlier version of the work, the artist has secreted the meaning of his text within a double encoding: cryptic in their sequence, his words are also expressed in the Cyrillic alphabet, thus requiring not only an aptitude for the analysis of codes, but also a reading knowledge of Russian. In contrast to the cylinder's allusion to high technology, the other central element in *The Code Room* is a petrified tree which stands, sentinel-like, as a mute body surrogate within a cacophony of projected language. Transformed from organic matter into rock, this tree form metaphorically reinforces Sanborn's contention that the workings of the material world can be illuminated by man-made structures of power.

*The Listening Post*, 1992 is actually a room within a room: within the architecture of the gallery Sanborn has created a domed, semi-enclosed structure. The outside walls of this small, circular room are made of copper screen. The inside walls are built of pulped paper formulated from shredded documents the artist obtained from the Central Intelligence Agency. The paper walls bear a low relief pattern created by the



*Code Room*, 1990





*Listening Post, 1991*

imprinting of texts in Cyrillic and Arabic. Like those in *The Code Room*, they are cryptogrammic, and address theories pertaining to the development of covert operations as well as actual surveillance reports. A looped film projection of a volcanic eruption forms a vivid backdrop for the purity of this encoded room. Casting a red glow, this curtain of fire acts as a counterpart to the static glow of *The Code Room*'s projected language, structuring what Sanborn feels is an analogy for the tremendous volume of "potentially incendiary information" that might pass through an actual listening post.

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*"The greatest chart we have for decoding is the Rosetta Stone. Cracking that code gave us the ability to understand an ancient language. What the CIA does now, as far as encoding and decoding, is a very similar kind of sleuthing: word sleuthing as opposed to physical sleuthing. The method of encoding and decoding that I use, called the Vigenere Tableau, is ancient. It was invented by the French diplomat Blaise de Vigenere in 1525. It isn't as simple as Morse code and it isn't as complex as Sanskrit, but it's still very well loved by contemporary cryptographers because it's a classic, elegant system."*

In 1988, Sanborn began *Kryptos*, a large-scale outdoor sculpture commission for the Central Intelligence Agency's new headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Completed in 1990, *Kryptos* expanded Sanborn's earlier notions of how natural systems function to encompass such human concepts as language and coded knowledge, especially as they related to the CIA's national security function. To express this, Sanborn constructed a landscaped inner courtyard with plants, trees, and pools of water. Within this setting, lodestones and petrified trees form the arena for a curved copper wall into which an encoded two thousand-letter message is carved. The hierarchical landscape of *Kryptos* finds a parallel in the historical role and rules of order of the courtly gardens of Renaissance Italy and France. What began in fifteenth-century Italian and French gardens as the imitation and celebration of nature evolved by the sixteenth century into monumentally scaled extravaganzas "inspired and governed very largely by the imagination, moulding and manipulating natural materials to the point where nature gave way entirely to artifice."<sup>4</sup> In *Kryptos* natural and man-made forms and materials instinctively echo the layers of order and ranks of power that characterized the emblematic garden architecture of the Italians, who blurred distinctions between interior and exterior spaces and wild and domesticated flora and fauna, and the French, whose precise geometric plans exemplified their subjugation of nature while embodying their interest in newly developed Cartesian theory, which took their gardens "beyond an expression of worldly phenomena," and into a "a paradoxical aesthetic, where reality and truth are in opposition, and where, by mastering illusion, artifice becomes the revealer of nature."<sup>5</sup> Within the diverse components of *Kryptos* a host of competing messages are obscured and commingled by progressively complex coding systems, from fossils to physical processes, from the simple Morse code to an intricate system of encryption which was developed for Sanborn by a former CIA cryptographer. From Sanborn's perspective, the hierarchies of human codes directly mirror those found in nature, and his intense interest in how the overlapping structure

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<sup>4</sup> Lionello Puppi, "Nature and Artifice in the Sixteenth-Century Italian Garden," in *The Architecture of Western Gardens: A Design History from the Renaissance to the Present Day*. Monique Mosser and Georges Teyssot, eds. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 47.

<sup>5</sup> J.P. Rameau, C. Kintzler, *Splendeurs et naufrage de l'esthetique du plaisir a l'age classique* (Paris, 1983) cited in Carmen Anon Feliu, "Nature and the Idea of Gardening in Eighteenth-Century Spain," in *The Architecture of Western Gardens*, 282.





*Kryptos*, 1988-90

of all systems of coded information manifests itself in the working of the physical world. Just as the geometric designs of Renaissance botanical gardens played a double role, serving as scientific repositories and exemplifying an underlying belief in the "magic" certain plants and herbs possessed because of the unseen forces of the zodiac, Sanborn's hierarchical plans for *Kryptos* and "Covert Obsolescence" reiterate his belief in the dualistic, intertwined relationship between man-made and natural forces.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lucia Tongiorgi Tomasi, "Botanical Gardens of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *The Architecture of Western Gardens*, 81.





*Kryptos*, 1988-90



*"Metaphor has always been important to me. Petrified trees and fossils were once moving, growing, and living, but have been somehow transfixed, turned to stone. In this way, the inclusion of those elements in The Code Room allude to the transfixing gaze of Medusa. The word Medusa is hidden as a key in one of the decoding charts. I chose Medusa partly because the last three letters of her name—U.S.A.—are also the initials for our country, and because the story of Medusa references the invisible quality of the gaze and its ability to transfix the viewer, to 'turn them to stone'."*

The impetus for much of Sanborn's earlier work was his desire to make the invisible visible, to describe the workings of an unseen world, and his work continues to display an affection for how sensuous materials can inhabit both physical and spiritual realms. However, in his most recent sculptural installations these materials act as a catalyst for an underlying content with more sinister and ironic overtones. For example, the concept behind the surveillance practiced by the Central Intelligence Agency views the Agency's interaction with society as a controlling but necessarily invisible force. To express this sense of an invisible "controlling hand," Sanborn's technique has also evolved. The technical complexity that he refers to as "tedium and obsessiveness" adds layers of density, making the content of the work difficult to discern immediately while simultaneously making the installation beautiful to behold. In this sense, Sanborn emulates the accessing and controlling functions of intelligence gathering by first establishing and then deflecting the voyeuristic gaze of his audience. The subliminal content in Sanborn's most recent work is hidden in the texts he selects to secret in the body of the sculpture. Because the messages cannot easily be read (but however complex the coding system, the messages can be decoded) his narratives become almost completely abstract, and we are forced to consider how the inference of narrative alters our sense of the construction of the physical object. The degree to which these texts may be understood relies on the desire for comprehension inherent in the viewer instead of any absolute solution proposed by the artist. In this sense, Sanborn's art becomes a parable for the layers of complexity inherent in the content and form of human understanding of the physical world.

Terrie Sultan

Curator of Contemporary Art



**Checklist:**

*The Code Room*, 1992

bronze cylinder, petrified tree

dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist and Nancy Drysdale Gallery,  
Washington, DC

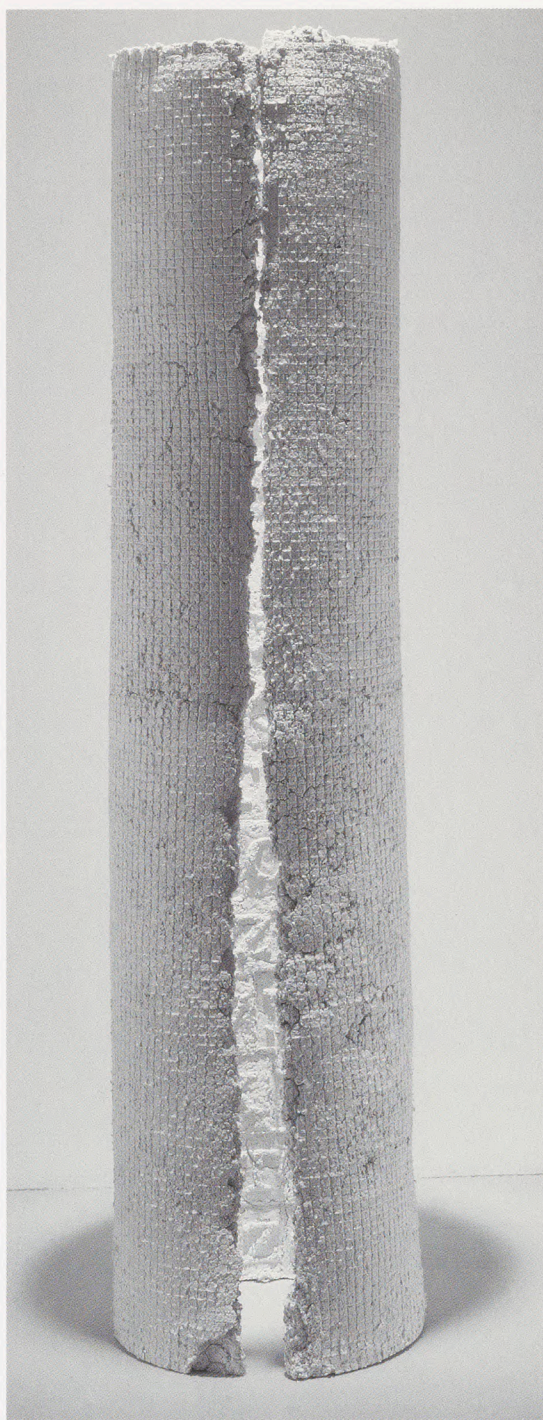
*The Listening Post*, 1992

copper screen, paper pulp, projector, film loop,

theater lights

dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist and Nancy Drysdale Gallery,  
Washington, DC



*Encoded Cylinder*, 1990



Jim Sanborn was born in Washington, DC in 1945. He received a BA from Randolph-Macon College, Ashland, Virginia, and an MFA in sculpture from Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York. He lives and works in Washington, DC.

## Awards

- 1982 Individual Artists Fellowship,  
National Endowment for the Arts  
Maryland Arts Council Grant, Works in Progress  
Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art Grant
- 1983 Artists Fellowship, District of Columbia,  
Commission on the Arts and Humanities  
U.S. Representative, Kawasaki International  
Sculpture Symposium, Kawasaki, Japan
- 1984 Artists Fellowship, Virginia Commission of the  
Arts and Humanities
- 1986 Individual Artists Fellowship,  
National Endowment for the Arts
- 1988 The Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant  
Awards in the Visual Arts Grant
- 1990 Art Matters, Inc. Grant
- 1991 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship

## One-person exhibitions

- 1974 "Virginia Artist: Jim Sanborn," Virginia Museum  
of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia
- 1976 Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, DC
- 1977 Hood College, Frederick, Maryland
- 1978 "Virginia Artist One-Man Shows: Jim Sanborn,"  
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond,  
Virginia
- 1980 Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, DC  
"Jim Sanborn: Landscapes," Sunrise Art Museum,  
Charleston, West Virginia
- 1981 "US Projects," Artists Space, New York
- 1985 Diane Brown Gallery, New York
- 1986 Diane Brown Sculpture Space, Washington, DC  
Diane Brown Gallery, New York
- 1992 "Covert Obsolescence," Corcoran Gallery of Art,  
Washington, DC (catalogue)  
Nancy Drysdale Gallery, Washington, DC

## Selected group exhibitions

- 1973 "Virginia Artists 1973," Virginia Museum of Fine  
Arts, Richmond, Virginia (catalogue)
- 1974 "19th Area Exhibition," Corcoran Gallery of Art,  
Washington, DC (catalogue)
- 1976 "The 1976 Maryland Biennial," Baltimore  
Museum of Art, Baltimore (catalogue)
- 1977 "Virginia Artists 1977," Virginia Museum of Fine  
Arts, Richmond, Virginia (catalogue)  
Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, DC  
Hood College, Frederick, Maryland
- 1978 "21st Area Show: Sculpture," Corcoran Gallery of  
Art, Washington, DC (catalogue)
- 1979 "Selections," Maryland Arts Council  
(traveling exhibition)
- 1980 "Rigging/Stacking/Binding," Washington Project  
for the Arts, Washington, DC (catalogue)  
International Sculpture Conference,  
Washington, DC  
"Forming Tomorrow Today," Maryland Institute,  
College of Art, Baltimore (catalogue)
- 1982 "Washington Artists to Houston," Lawndale  
Center, University of Houston, Houston  
"Diane Brown Gallery Artists," Bayly Art Museum,  
University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia  
"Artists Environments," Maryland Institute,  
College of Art, Baltimore
- 1983 "The Next Juried Show," Virginia Museum of Fine  
Arts, Richmond, Virginia (catalogue)
- 1984 "Content: A Contemporary Focus, 1974-1984,"  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,  
Washington, DC (catalogue)
- 1985 "Natural Settings," Corcoran Gallery of Art,  
Washington, DC (catalogue)
- 1987 "SECCA Ten-Year Anniversary Exhibition,"  
Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art,  
Winston-Salem, North Carolina (catalogue)
- 1988 "Awards in the Visual Arts 7," Los Angeles County  
Museum of Art; Carnegie-Mellon University  
Art Gallery, Pittsburgh; and Virginia  
Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia  
(catalogue)
- 1991 C. Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland



## Selected bibliography:

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- \_\_\_\_\_, "A Distant Viewing of Natural Settings," *The Washington Times*, January 13, 1986.
- Denise Arnot, "Jim Sanborn at the Diane Brown Gallery," *The New Art Examiner*, June 1982.
- Thomas Bell, "Sculptor's Top Secret Mission," *The Washington Post*, January 14, 1990. C1-2.
- Paul Clements, "The Sanborn File," *Museum and Arts Washington*, March 1991. 40-41, 65.
- David Ellis, "The Spooks' Secret Sculpture Garden," *TIME*, March 18, 1991. 15.
- Lee Fleming, "Jim Sanborn at the Diane Brown Sculpture Space," *The New Art Examiner*, March 1980.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Washington's Museum Quality Artists," *The Washingtonian Magazine*, October 1981.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Artists the Critics are Watching," *ARTnews*, October 1984. 84.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Hirshhorn's Tenth-Anniversary Exhibition Documents a Radical Shift in the Art of the Last Decade: The Return of Content," *ARTnews*, January 1985. 87.
- Benjamin Forgey, "The Young Voices of Washington Sculpture," *The Washington Star*, October 15, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "It Takes More Than an Outdoor Site to Make Sculpture Public," *ARTnews*, September 1980. 88.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Energy Emerges in Stone," *The Washington Star*, February 17, 1980.
- Howard Fox, *Rigging/Stacking/Binding*, (exh. cat., Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C., 1980).
- \_\_\_\_\_, Miranda McClintic, and Phyllis Rosenzweig, *Content: A Contemporary Focus, 1974-1984*, (exh. cat., Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1984).
- Phyllis Freeman, *New Art*, (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1984).
- Lewis M. Freudenheim, *Baltimore's Public Art, 1960-1980*, (exh. cat., Maryland Institute, College of Art, Baltimore, 1980).
- Tom L. Freudenheim and James Melchart, *The 1976 Maryland Biennial*, (exh. cat., Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, 1976).
- Bill Gertz, "Cryptic Sculpture Spooks C.I.A. Employees," *The Washington Times*, April 18, 1991.
- Elizabeth Hess, "The Art of the State," *The Village Voice*, February 16, 1988.
- Walter Hopps and Elanore Dickinson, *Atlantic Coast--Pacific Coast*, (California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, California, 1982).
- Colin Hughes, "Secret Messages of the C.I.A.," *The London Independent*, January 17, 1990.
- Carleton Jones, "Outdoor Art for the Auto Age," *The Baltimore Sun*, August 14, 1977. D3.
- Christopher Knight, "Taking the Measure of U.S. Art and Artists," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, June 5, 1988.
- Anne Koch, "Going Public with Art," *The Washington Post*, October 1, 1987.
- Donald Kuspit, *Awards in the Visual Arts 7*, (exh. cat., Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1988).
- Jo Ann Lewis, "W.P.A. Group Show," *The Washington Post*, November 2, 1976.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "With an Art of Stone," *The Washington Post*, February 2, 1980. D2.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Coils and Whimsy," *The Washington Post*, May 24, 1980. C1.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Echoes of Nature's Power," *The Washington Post*, March 27, 1982.
- Glenn Long, A. Beers, and D. Nancy, *Jim Sanborn: Landscapes*, (exh. cat., Sunrise Art Museum, Charleston, West Virginia, 1980).
- Robert C. Morgan, "Jim Sanborn," *Arts Magazine*, Summer 1985. 18.
- Joshua Remo, "C.I.A. cryptic on Artwork," *The Boston Globe*, July 4, 1990.
- Paul Richard, "Scholarly Stories in Sculpture," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Crammed with Content," *The Washington Post*, October 4, 1984. B1.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "The New Lay of the Landscape," *The Washington Post*, January 11, 1986. G9.
- Jack Rosenberger, "The C.I.A.'s Top-Secret Sculpture," *Art in America*, March 1991. 33.

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